



Uma Parameswaran

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This m.m. syndrome is frightening. Of course, one knows the basic symptoms of male menopause as well as one knows about hot flashes and mood swings in women, though television talk shows never parade men the way they do women. We secretaries know a lot about these things; not just about our own husbands and fathers and brothers and neighbours but the ten or fifteen men that each of us works with everyday, and some of the women faculty who could just as well be men. In our collective wisdom, we share our knowledge over lunch: it is a quite formidable database.

— Maru and the M.M. Syndrome

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Quick Facts

- * Born and raised in India, earned her Ph.D. in America, and currently works in Canada
- * Poet, playwright, and academic

Biography

Uma Parameswaran -- poet, playwright, and short-story writer -- was born in Madras and grew up in Jabalpur, India. Parameswaran read extensively drawing motivation from epic poetry and Greek theater through her schooling and during the India-China war of 1962. Receiving the Smith-Mundt Fulbright Scholarship, Parameswaran moved to the United States to study American Literature at Indiana University earning her MA in Creative Writing. She completed her Ph.D. in English at Michigan State University in 1972. Currently she is a professor of English at The University of Winnipeg. Since settling in Canada, Parameswaran has devoted much of her writing and efforts in the literary field to creating an identifiable South Asian Canadian diaspora.



This page was researched and submitted by: Sonja Maria Thomas.



Uma Parameswaran

Biography continued

In 1962, while still in India, Parameswaran wrote “Sons Must Die,” a play centered on the Partition of 1947. Other plays followed: “Meera” in 1971, “Sita’s Promise” in 1981, “Dear Deedi, My Sister” in 1989 (first prize in the Caribe play writing contest, 1989) and “Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees” in 1998. They were collected into *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* and published in 1998 as a part of the South Asian Canadian Literature Series (SACLIT), of which Parameswaran is the general editor. Parameswaran’s volume of poetry, *Trishanku and Other Writings* (1987) is also included in the SACLIT series.

Parameswaran recognizes the experiences of Indo-Canadians as expressed through literature to be unique in their own right: The literature of Canadian writers born on the Indian subcontinent (India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh) is varied in content and form, but common to all of them is a passionate faith in their own voice that is raised to express their Canadian experience . . . [Indo-Canadian writers] bring to their writing not only racial memory and contemporary history, but the poetic traditions and modes of India. As such, Parameswaran published *SACLIT: An introduction to South-Asian-Canadian Literature* in 1996. The work is a collection of essays written between 1982-1992 and focuses on the South Asian diaspora in Canada.

What Was Always Hers, a collection of short stories and winner of the 1999 New Muse Award and the Canadian Authors Association 2000 Jubilee Award for Best Short Stories, is Parameswaran’s latest work of fiction. The volume contains the stories “What Was Always Hers,” “Maru and the M.M. Syndrome,” “Darkest Before Dawn,” “How We Won Olympic Gold,” and “The Icicle.”

There is a distinctive progression in Parameswaran’s works. This progression can most easily be seen through both her choices of subject matter and in her increasing fluidity in language. *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* provides an excellent example of her progression. “Sons Must Die” centers on the experiences of three women in 1947 India. “Their maternal sensibility transcends political boundaries and sees what Wilfred Owen calls the ‘pity of war.’” The play is influenced by Parameswaran’s interest in Greek tragedies, containing a chorus and stylized language of the verse. “Meera” and “Sita’s Promise,” on the other hand “set out to celebrate Indian art tradition and at the same time to educate the outsider about our culture.”



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Written during her years in Canada, both “Meera” and “Sita’s Promise” draw from the Hindu paranas and the great Hindu epics of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. At the same time, both these plays blend in a sense of modernity and the Canadian experience. “Sita’s Promise,” for example, utilizes the characters of the *Ramayana*, but is set in Canada and uses modern English prose.

“Dear Deedi, My Sister” describes the life and hardships of immigrants in Canada through a variety of characters and the letters written between Sapna in Canada and her sister in India. As Sapna muses, “Here too women suffer, dear Deedi, for being women. The burdens are different but the pain is the same.” In “Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees,” Parameswaran’s progression of subject matter moves to the new generation of Indo-Canadians -- children of immigrants raised in Canada. The relationships and complications of the characters aided by the free flowing prose of the play reveal Parameswaran’s attempt to capture the South Asian Canadian experience across all boards through literature.

Her most recent collection, *What Was Always Hers*, delves deeper into these relationships. As Parameswaran has been the two-time chair of the Status of Women Writers Committee of the Writers’ Union of Canada, member of the Margaret Laurence Chair of Women’s Studies, and has sat on board of Immigrant Women’s Association of Manitoba, she is no stranger to the experiences of South Asian Women in Canada. The stories in *What Was Always Hers* take Parameswaran’s writing to an even further height as she develops character relationships between South Asian women. She has been able to write about South Asian women in a range of professions from the secretary to the housewife drawing from her own experiences as a professor and her observations of South Asian Canadian women. From immigrant women and Canadian-born South Asian women to exploring the generation gap between old and young South Asian women, Parameswaran’s stories contain the highest degree of cultural sensitivity. By Parameswaran’s writing we are not only constantly aware of the South Asian experience, but also of the struggles in life that make us all human.



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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